

*Observations on Gildas and the Uncertainties of Early English History.*

*By Philip H. Law.*

*(Read before the American Philosophical Society, April 6, 1888.)*

Historians and antiquarians have been inclined to base their statements too much on guesses. Pyramids of very doubtful conjecture have been erected on a foundation of a very few facts : and those facts very uncertain. The pregnant aphorism of Dr. Johnson that history written from facts not recorded at or near the time of their happening is a mere work of the imagination, should be constantly present to their minds. But, alas, it is generally ignored, for if it were applied it would reduce the vast volumes of archæological learning to a very small compass.

Any one reading the early history of England in the popular historians and of its conquest by the so-called Anglo-Saxons, but who called themselves the *Ænglisk*, would believe that our knowledge of the events of its conquest were certain ; at least, as certain as the events of the reign of Edward I.

But if we examine the sources of information we will find them to be profoundly unreliable. That a conquest did occur, a severe and drastic one, cannot be doubted or denied. The great change of language establishes this ; absolutely proving the obliteration or enslavement of the native population. The latter was, according to the probabilities, the case.

The captive of a rude and warlike people is too useful to be slain except in the heat of battle. The barbarian hates persistent work ; his labor is war ; his enjoyments are the chase and the wassail bowl ; and land, without slaves to work it, is for him but of little use.

The historians of the Anglo-Saxon Conquest draw their facts from the monk Gildas. And to these the writers of the picturesque school, such as the late Mr. Green, add facts drawn from their imagination ; for example, Mr. Green in his special history of the period describes, as if he was an eye-witness what is a matter of pure conjecture, giving a most vivid account of the sack of Anderida, the line of march taken by the different Saxon bands, how they fought, and what they did.

But as to these we have but one authority who has even pretensions to be a contemporary—Gildas, the British monk. A few casual but not connected remarks occur in Continental writers. Britain in the days of the Roman Empire was a very obscure and very unimportant dependency. It was not more important to the Roman Empire than New Zealand is now to the present English Empire. Naturally, therefore, very little importance was attached to what happened there ; indeed, the whole Latin literature of the time, except in theology, is scanty. The Anglo-Saxons were completely barbarous and without letters. No record was kept by them of their conquest. Gildas, therefore, is our only authority, and if his authenticity is disproved, complete darkness will cover the subject of

the Anglo-Saxon Conquest, except such inductions as we may form from change of language.

I will, therefore, examine the claims of Gildas. He is reputed to have been a Welsh monk who wrote about 520 A.D.; and his youth would have been nearly contemporaneous with the Saxon invasions. The book is in Latin and bears the title of "De Excidio Britanniae;" and covers about fifty or sixty pages of a small duodecimo volume. It is composed of two parts, distinct in their nature; the first containing the history of the invasions; the second, a long, rambling account of remarkable events which occur in the Biblical narrative. The style is most singular. It is not a mere dry narrative of events like most of the so-called Chronicles, interspersed with naive and quaint remarks; but it has a distinct lyrical tone and manner, with a kind of rhythmical flow of the sentences; indeed, it reads like a prose chant. It commences with a description of the wickedness of the Britons, ascribing to them all manner of sins. After the departure of the Roman armies they fall into divisions and civil wars. The Picts attack them, and upon their doleful complaints to the Romans, the Romans return, drive out after many battles the Picts, and to secure them from further attacks, build the great wall. Upon their departure the Picts recommence their attacks. The Britons send again for the Romans, who, after conquering the Picts, build another and larger wall from sea to sea, protected by large castles erected upon it. But this does not prevent the Picts from entering and commencing fresh attacks, harrying and destroying the whole country. The Romans returning to their frantic appeals a deaf answer, Vortigern, one of their kings, calls in the Saxons, and here occurs the well-known tale of Vortigern and Rowena. The Saxons, from being merely auxiliaries, quickly take advantage of the weakness of their allies and proceed to subjugate them; and, being joined by numbers of their kinsfolk from across the sea, gradually conquer the whole of Britain.

This is the account found in almost all the English histories as the reliable account of the Saxon Conquest. Historians desirous of forming a connected account, naturally do not like to acknowledge ignorance of the most important event and revolution in the annals of the country; no less than a complete change in its language and probably a partial change in the blood of the people, certainly of that of the ruling class.

But to archæologists who require proof, Gildas has always appeared a most unhistorical writer and of no authenticity. Several facts which lie patent in his book have always struck them as entirely inconsistent with a contemporary author such as he claims to be; and first, his peculiar style, which is utterly unlike what a contemporary historian would use. It appears much more like a poem turned into prose than a dry narrative of facts. And second, from his notorious errors in history, in which he narrates as contemporaneous, events which had occurred long before; for instance, his describing the civil wars of Maxentius and Constantine as occurring about that time when they occurred nearly a cen-

ture before. And, above all, from his describing as then being built, the two great northern walls of defense, while we know that one of them had been built by Hadrian nearly three hundred years, and that the other, the wall of Severus, nearly two hundred years. These facts, in my opinion, are crucial tests. It is possible, perhaps, for a contemporary to be mistaken as to the civil wars, but how could it be possible to make such a mistake about a fact which was so patent as the building of those great walls?

As well could a person who pretended to live in A. D. 1888 in Philadelphia, assert that the great city hall was erected by William Penn.

Such a statement would stamp at once its author, whatever his pretensions might be, as not a contemporary.

Besides this many of the facts which we know from the Roman records and from the remains of the burials and other records, are inconsistent with the common story of the Saxon Conquest.

From the *Notitia Imperii*, which was a survey of the Roman Empire taken in the end of the fourth century, we learn that the whole of the east coast was already called the *Litus Saxonicum*, the Saxon Shore; and was governed by a special Count, thus probably indicating that a large population of that race was already there settled.

From the remains disinterred from the tombs it appears that the Saxons and Britons were frequently buried side by side, each corpse in the respective national manner.

Another remarkable fact also appears from the inspection of these tombs, that scarcely any appearance of Christian burial has been found. From this it would seem that most of the British population still remained Pagan; a fact which will perhaps explain why the Saxons did not, like the Franks, the Goths, the *Allemanni*, adopt Christianity.

The information furnished by the Welsh chroniclers seems always to have been particularly unreliable. They are full of inventions which are plainly the work of their own fancies. In *Nennius*, who is a Welsh writer on the history of Britain, and who cannot be later than the commencement of the tenth century at the farthest, the legend of King Brute and his Trojans already begins. This was finally developed in *Geoffrey of Monmouth*, a Welsh Bishop about 1150 A. D., who starting from King Brute develops a long line of Kings until the time of Julius Cæsar. He gives their names, the incidents of their reigns, their personal peculiarities and their speeches, with a detail and a certainty almost amazing. Frequently these contradict the well-known facts related in the Roman historians. The Roman history, though well known at the time from the manuals like *Orosius* and others which were extensively copied and read in the middle ages, does not seem to inspire him with any doubt. It has always struck me as a most singular historical problem why such fables and inventions could have been so readily accepted. They were given place in almost all the histories of England which were written until the time of the Renaissance, and were apparently accepted as completely credible, and indeed almost to the commencement of the seventeenth century.

Also they scarcely seem to have been the result of conscious invention. Geoffrey of Monmouth was apparently a man of good character and a Bishop of the church. His position, therefore, seems to render it improbable that he committed a complete literary forgery like that of George Psalmanazzar; and if he did not, what was the origin of these tales?

I conjecture, although I have very little proof to offer, that it may have originated something in this way. The Welsh chieftains were all fond of poetry, and kept in their service bards to sing their praises and that of their ancestors. Long genealogies were spun out connecting them with the great of the olden time. The license of song and verse would naturally increase the facility of invention.

This poetry would gradually in an uncritical age become considered veritable history, and finally, clipped of its ornaments, be turned into sober prose, and make its appearance as authentic history. An enormous mass of Welsh poetry is, I believe, in existence, mostly unprinted, and it would be very interesting and instructive if some scholar learned in Welsh, and with access to the manuscripts, would examine if the legendary history of Britain did not originate in this manner.

The same causes would explain the legendary history of Scotland, the darkness of which is incomparably greater than that of England. Indeed, it seems to me that with the exceptions of the glimpses afforded by the occasional notices of English chroniclers, nothing definite is known until about the time of Edward I of England.

A long series of kings is given with the events of their reigns, yet no explanation is given of the change from a Celtic-speaking people to an English-speaking people, apparently about the year 1000 A. D. The lowlands of Scotland were a people who used Gaelic and were governed by kings with characteristic Celtic names of Macbeth, MacDuff, Duncan, Malcolm, and with institutions of the regular clan or tribal nature. But when the light of history becomes bright and clear, they speak a dialect of English, their institutions are of the feudal rather than the clan type—their kings and nobles have names either Teutonic or Norman in the etymology; and yet of this great revolution there is not a word in history.

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*On Miocene Invertebrates from Virginia (With Plate).*

*By Otto Meyer, Ph.D.*

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Prof. J. J. Stevenson, of the University of New York, has collected a quantity of Miocene material near Yorktown, Va. In his collection there are quite a number of specimens of large species in fine preservation, like *Mercenaria tridacnoides* Lam. sp., *Panopea reflexa* Say, *Ecphora*